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ABSTRACT

This paper involves focus group research with adolescent women from coeducational and single sex independent schools. First, it discusses research that finds girls who attend single sex institutions to be at a distinct advantage with respect to gender issues and academics. In order to obtain a better understanding of these differences, a study is described that investigated the reasons why parents and their children choose single sex over coeducational environments. Next, it reviews research demonstrating that all female environments tend to promote adherence to particularly confusing gender role concerns. A brief discussion is included on literature typing body image and eating disturbances to a sense of gender ambivalence resulting from increased exposure to conflicting gender role prescriptions. Focus group data are analyzed and discussed in the context of the literature reviewed. The paper does not attempt to determine if single sex education is superior or inferior for adolescent girls; rather, the work is exploratory in nature and seeks to expose some of the gendered dynamics occurring within various educational contexts. (Contains 47 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Gender and Body Concerns in Adolescent Females: Single Sex and Coeducational School Environments.

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Abstract

The present paper involves focus group research with adolescent women from coeducational and single sex independent schools. The literature reviewed first involves research that finds girls attending single sex institutions at a distinct advantage with respect to gender issues and academics. In order to obtain a better understanding of these differences, a study investigating the reasons why parents and their children choose single sex over coeducational environments is detailed. Next, I review research demonstrating that all female environments tend to promote adherence to particularly confusing gender role concerns. The implications of this work directed me to literature tying body image and eating disturbances to a sense of gender ambivalence resulting from increased exposure to conflicting gender role prescriptions. A brief discussion of this theory precedes the final piece of research reviewed, which involves a quantitative study connecting single sex environments to increased levels of disordered eating. The focus group data are analyzed and discussed in the context of the literature reviewed. The concern of the present paper is not to determine if single sex education is superior or inferior for adolescent girls; rather, this work is exploratory in nature and seeks to expose some of the gendered dynamics occurring within various educational contexts.

Gender and Body Concerns in Adolescent Females:

Single sex and Coeducational School Environments

Adolescence is often characterized as a chronic state of emotional turbulence. In hopes to resolve the Margaret Mead--Derek Freeman controversy over the landmark study of *Coming of Age in Somoa,* (i.e., the nature versus nurture debate with respect to adolescent emotional turbulence) the academic community has come to understand this period of "storm and stress" as attributable to an interaction between the biological disequilibrium stimulated by puberty and cultural or environmental circumstances (Cote', 1994). The physiologically inevitable changes in one's physical appearance, often occurring quite rapidly during adolescence, commonly result in body image disturbances, especially in girls (Grogan, 1999; Keel, Fulkerson, & Leon, 1997; Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). Adding to this difficulty, in Western cultures the threshold of adolescence marks an intensification of gender role prescriptions. It is during this stage that girls become most aware of what will be expected of them as they approach adulthood (Johnson, Roberts, & Worell, 1999). Despite increased gender role flexibility over the past quarter century, messages remain, at best, conflicting in regards to the opportunities presently accorded to women on one hand, and the practical expectations of women still prevailing on the other. Also, while our society's dominant culture values independence and becoming an autonomous individual as one matures, girls often establish a sense of identity primarily in relation to others (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). As adolescent girls grapple with their development as women amidst these contradictions, they frequently pay harsh social and psychological consequences.

Psychological research on adolescent girls has tended to underestimate the importance of context (Johnson et al., 1999). While a multitude of contexts impinge upon the daily behaviors of adolescents, this paper will focus on the social context of schools. The most relevant aspect of a school's social context to the present discussion is probably its gender composition. Single sex verses coeducation has developed into a long standing debate in the literature dating back to 1906 when G. Stanley Hall argued to continue educating the sexes separately. Over the years a large body of research has accumulated on the benefits and drawbacks of single sex education

(see Shmurak, 1998 or AAUW, 1998 for a review). The concern of the present paper however, is not to determine if single sex education is superior or inferior for adolescent girls; rather, this research is exploratory in nature and seeks to expose some of the gendered dynamics occurring within different educational contexts.

Review of the Literature

Many studies conducted in Westernized societies, primarily in the 1980's, have found girls educated in single sex environments to gain an array of academic and gender related benefits such as superior math achievement and decreased exposure to sex role stereotyping (Dederick, Dederick, & Zalk, 1977; Vockell, & Lobonc, 1981; Trickett, Trickett, Castro, & Schaffner, 1982; Hamilton, 1985; Lee, & Byrk, 1986; Harvey, & Stables, 1986; Carpenter, & Hayden, 1987; Foon, 1988; Lee, & Lockheed, 1990; Cairns 1990; Riordan, 1992). In order to better understand why such an abundance of differences may exist across the globe between girls attending single sex institutions and those attending coeducational schools, Lee and Marks (1992) conducted research focusing on the reasons that parents and their children choose to be educated in single sex as opposed to coeducational secondary schools. The data used for this study came from the United States National Study of Gender Grouping in Independent Secondary Schools. Past research and experience working in single sex environments led Lee and Marks to conceptualize two different rationales for why families might choose single sex education for their daughters. Some families, often those who are newer to the private school track, see single sex education as an "opportunity structure" that has the potential of being an empowering experience for their daughter. An environment that is academically focused and less socially distracting will, they hope, equip young women with the skills and confidence "to surmount gender discrimination and stratification in the larger social arena" (p. 226). Other families gravitate to the single sex environment for its "traditional structure." These primarily upper class families have a long history of attending prestigious single sex institutions. Parents in this group are seeking the elite, conservative and protective environment that single sex institutions have historically offered young women.

A logistic regression utilizing a multi-level model that predicted attendance to a single sex versus a coeducational secondary school was imposed on the data collected in order to reveal significant factors. Significant level one variables, those involving personal characteristics, were age, religiosity, and being Jewish. Students attending single sex schools were somewhat older, more religious, and less likely to identify as Jewish. The only significant factors revealed in level two variables, which involved characteristics of the family, were the educational backgrounds of both parents and relatives. Having parents, siblings, or other relatives who attended single sex schools, significantly predicted choosing a single sex institution. In addition, what could be interpreted as a contradictory finding, having parents who attended all *public* schools also predicted choosing a single sex high school. Significant level three variables, consisting of entry level characteristics such as academic abilities, included having attended a single sex private elementary school, and having lower standardized math scores. The fourth and final level of variables, those involving personal reasons for choosing the type of school they attend, listed in the order of their significance, included a) the school admitting only women, b) the school's college placement record, and c) the option of boarding facilities.

Keeping in mind both the opportunity versus traditional structures, it is also important to note the group of factors that did *not* significantly influence a family's choice of single sex over coeducational schools for their daughters. These factors included tuition costs, family income, race-ethnicity, school selectivity, strong financial aid packages, and much to the surprise of the researchers, social reputation, that is, the characteristic of being known as a "finishing school." Not only did families fail to indicate social reputation as a significantly deciding factor when choosing to attend a single sex institution, but single sex schools were no more likely than coeducational schools to be considered a "finishing school". Interestingly, social reputation was a significant deciding factor for those attending a coeducational school.

Given that by far the best predictor among reasons for choosing to attend a single sex institution was the very fact that the school only admitted women, we know that girls and their families are choosing the single sex option not just because these schools have otherwise

desirable characteristics but because they are in fact single sex institutions. Additionally, academic as opposed to social reputation being a significant predictor of choosing a single sex institution, suggests that choices seemed to be derived from the opportunity structure rationale. The strong influences of religiosity, and families with single sex educational histories however, as well as the importance of boarding facilities being available, suggest that the traditional clientele are still quite clearly represented. With a conservative world view coming from the traditional families and a more progressive ideology reflecting the values of first generation families who are seeking an empowering opportunity for their daughter, these structures essentially represent conflicting interests. This unspoken competition may in fact play out as a subtle but real structural ambivalence prevailing in the environment of many single sex institutions. The administrations of single sex independent schools are herein confronted with a serious dilemma. They are obligated to continue appealing to the monetarily fundamental yet shrinking market of traditional families who, with their financial endowments, will ensure the survival of single sex institutions. In today's competitive market however, and with threats resulting from Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (1), single sex schools must also assure the public that they do in fact offer pedagogically advantageous educations for young women. Thus, they are simultaneously forced to reach out to this new more progressive clientele interested in the opportunistic nature of the single sex environment. Given the schools' attempts to sufficiently meet these potentially incompatible goals, the adolescent girls are vulnerable to suffering the consequences of continually receiving mixed messages from their families, teachers, and the general ambiance of their schools.

It is important to note that despite the research cited above painting an academically and vocationally encouraging picture of single sex institutions, studies have been conducted where no differences between single sex and coeducational schools emerged (e.g., Harris, 1986; Marsh 1989; Young & Frazer, 1992; Lepore & Warren, 1997; Harker & Nash 1997). Furthermore, other studies have alluded to the presence of subtle conflicting expectations placed on young women attending single sex institutions. A qualitative piece about girls attending a single sex

school in the United States discussed the prevalence of superwoman ideals demonstrated by participants in their reports of strong desires for marrying and raising children while still fully intending to achieve high status professions (Brody et al., 1998). In addition, Signorella and Frieze (1996) did a study in the United States where they were unable to support their hypothesis of less gender stereotyping occurring in single sex rather than coeducational schools. Moreover, extensive research on gender and school environments in Australia has led Gill to refer to the single sex benefit as "a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't-effect that is both tantalising and frustrating" (1996, p.7). She has come to the determination that "teacher awareness is of much more significance than school gender context in producing or overcoming stereotypical gender limitations on students" (p. 17).

In Heyward's research (1995) the presence of conflicting messages in one of these "female valuing" environments in Canada is made quite evident. While the school pays tremendous lip service to their girls maintaining a "lady-like" appearance, their sack-shaped tunic for a uniform, often still seen today in North American private schools, distinctly disguises any hints of feminine curves or sexuality. Jewelry and make-up are forbidden for the most part, and the requirement of ascots and oxfords indeed portray a masculine appearance. The administration claims not wanting to overemphasize the importance of appearance in response to the modern obsession with body image; however, Heyward's observations suggest that negative impacts have nevertheless resulted. Although it may not be initially apparent, over time one can imagine how this dress code might subliminally communicate a fundamentally confusing statement. In Heyward's words, the underlying message the dress code, alongside other school policies, suggests is "that feminine sexuality is a shameful thing, that intellectual pursuit is a masculine attribute, and that academic success is achieved only by imitation of the 'superior' male" (p.195). The consequences of such a subtle yet powerful paradox, that females are indeed valued and expected to achieve on one hand, yet success requires a masculine presentation on the other, could be detrimental to a young woman's sense of identity. There seems to be a tacit understanding in these particularly advantageous single sex environments that young women can

and should strive to have it all.

Lee, Marks, and Byrd (1994) attempted to reconcile some of the questions and contradictions in the literature through the qualitative investigation of the process of "engenderment" in single sex versus coeducational independent secondary schools. Using a macro-societal perspective borrowed from the British school's social production model, they assert "that students and teachers are active agents of accommodation, resistance, or alternative choices" (p. 93). In their model, social change is accounted for through the analysis of the interacting societal structures at the institutional and interpersonal levels. The institution of education is particularly important given that these environments act as the "primary sites of socialization for adolescents" (p. 93). It is recognized that despite individual agency, the patterns operating within institutions clearly shape one's alternatives to the degree that a specific choice will likely be made over others (Epstein, 1988). Due to Title IX of the Educational Amendments, single sex institutions can only operate legally in the private sector; therefore, the actions of these schools are indeed financially pressured to reflect the values of the affluent and often conservative clients whom they serve. Given this reality, it is easier to understand why this extensive research of over 20 independent secondary schools in the United States revealed a disconcerting preponderance of sexism occurring in the single sex environments. In fact, the vast majority of incidents were initiated by the faculty. A common example involved encouraging girls to behave in dependent or childlike behaviors, or adopting a noticeably non-rigorous approach to certain subject matters. Although these actions may appear innocuous, repetitious treatment of this kind, in conjunction with a conservative elite upbringing within the family environment, could conceivably produce potentially talented young women who on one hand feel expected to do no more than marry into another upper class family and raise children, and on the other feel pressured towards the kinds of careers modern women can achieve today. Whichever road a young woman ultimately chooses to take, she is likely to be left feeling conflicted by this choice. Additionally, how might these traditional values impact the girls of the upwardly mobile families seeking an opportunity structure in their choice of a single sex

institution for their daughter? The juxtaposition of feminist pedagogy and the traditional principles still evident in teachers and many of the familial backgrounds of students may be creating larger unforeseen problems. Researchers reported that even in the schools where the girls were clearly coddled, "feminism and sexism were sometimes evident simultaneously in the same class ...delivering a confusing message to students" (p. 112). Clearly, Lee et al's research further substantiates the phenomenon of competing structures communicating mixed statements to adolescent girls who are often struggling to find their identity.

It is more understandable now why inconsistencies remain in the literature on single sex versus coeducation. Evidently, many single sex institutions are not solely attended by young women from progressive families as would be suggested by some of the previous literature reviewed. The American Association of University Women's 1998 publication on single sex education also reports the problem with "recent popular commentary on single-sex education sometimes informally assum[ing] that single sex environments by their nature diminish sex stereotyping" (p. 20). As we have seen, the heterogeneous populations that often today comprise the independent school system make these goals difficult. Amira Proweller's (1998) ethnographic study of a single sex institution also addresses this problem. She asserts that the vast changes in the class culture of private school education are bound to have ramifications on the construction of female identities taking place behind these once very exclusive walls. That is, the remaining influence of the traditional affluent families could in fact disable those seeking female empowerment from successfully overcoming the very gender inequities from which these progressive families have worked so hard to save their daughters. As Lee et al's previous research has shown, the fact remains that most families choosing the single sex option "are likely to be seeking *either* safe and traditional environments for 'young ladies' *or* academically demanding educational environments in which girls are free to flourish–not both" (emphasis in the original, 1994, p. 112).

The perhaps dismal consequences of these opposing interests lead us into the body of research on disordered eating and gender role attitudes. Over the decades since the women's

movement, feminist researchers in the field of body image and eating disorders among women have speculated about the problematic nature of the opposing forces between accepting one's developing curves [which have been conceptualized as symbolically representing the caring and interrelatedness inherent in a "feminine" identity, (Gilligan, 1982)] or abiding by the more recent liberated, "masculine" conception of womanhood which involves the "self-made" female with exceptionally high standards for achievement (Orbach, 1978, 1986; Steiner-Adair, 1986; Barnett, 1986). In anorectic women, Susie Orbach describes the recurrent theme of "thinness as ultra-feminine and at the same time thinness as rejection of femininity" creating a parody of modern female attractiveness (1986, p. 85). Best sellers such as Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* (1991), reflected in the following passage, have brought these issues to the forefront of feminist scholarship:

> Young women have been doubly weakened: Raised to compete like men in rigid male-model institutions, they must also maintain to the last detail an impeccable femininity. Gender roles, for this generation of women, did not harmonize so much as double: Young women today are expected to act like "real men" and look like "real women." Fathers transferred to daughters the expectations of achievement once reserved for sons; but the burden to be a beauty, inherited from the mothers, was not lightened in response. (p. 211)

A passionate discussion of the modern epidemic of eating disorders throughout *The Beauty Myth* stands as a testimony to the consequences faced by young women exposed to conflicting gender role prescriptions.

In Timko, Streigel-Moore, Silberstein, and Rodin's study (1987) of the relationship between femininity, masculinity, and disordered eating there is also evidence of apparent conflicting gender roles in women with eating issues. Their data found that the importance of socially desirable masculine traits *paired with* the importance of appearance (again alluding to a possible conflict of interests) were significant predictors of disordered eating. Their results also indicated that women reporting a greater number of roles as central to their identity displayed more disordered eating than those defining themselves by fewer roles. Furthermore, those

individuals identifying with more roles in general, were significantly more likely to rate masculine traits as important. Once again, this research recommends we should further examine the implications of the multiple and often conflicting roles placed on modern women.

Silverstein and Perlick (1995) in their book *The Cost of Competence*, also argue that especially during historical times of changing gender roles, intelligent adolescent women with nontraditional aspirations have faced emotional dilemmas as they tried to develop an identity. The typical result of these emotional dilemmas was a sense of gender ambivalence, that is, "feeling split between their femininity and the aspects of themselves defined by academic, professional, and political achievement, which are often labeled, even today, as 'masculine.' For some of these women, this conflict has led them to devalue aspects of their own feminine identities" (p. 7). In Silverstein and Perlick's words, "disordered eating is just one of the costs of competence paid by talented women who strive to succeed" (p.10).

Considering the evolution of this literature review, one might wonder if there is any evidence to date connecting single sex environments to disordered eating and/or body image issues. Mensinger (2001) has performed secondary analysis on data collected by Dyer and Tiggemann (1996) that does in fact establish a clear connection between disordered eating and girls attending single sex institutions. Among a series of findings, her analyses yielded significant differences favoring the coeducational group on an abridged form of the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmsted, & Polivy, 1983). Girls from the coeducational group displayed less body dissatisfaction, less bulimic eating behaviors, and were less driven towards thinness. In addition, girls from the single sex environment reported thinner ideal and attractive figures as rated on the Figure Rating Scale (Fallon & Rozin, 1985). Overall, girls with higher Body Mass Indexes attending single sex schools had more difficulty with eating and body image issues when compared to their similar weight peers in coeducational environments. While these results initially may seem counterintuitive, given the conflicting gender role theory discussed in the present paper, it appears quite clear how these findings could exist. If a sense of gender ambivalence is a risk factor for disordered eating, as the literature suggests, then environments

promoting conflicting gender role prescriptions would be expected to constitute more individuals at risk.

Methodology

The research conducted for the present paper primarily consisted of two focus group discussions with adolescent girls from either a single sex or coeducational school in New York City. In general the discussions involved the social lives of these particular girls at their respective schools. I did not personally know any of the participants of the groups prior to the commencement of the research. My main contact person for the single sex group involved a neighbor of a colleague, and my key person for the coeducational group was a girl for whom my sister babysat. The schools represented were both urban private institutions with selective admissions and a predominately Caucasian middle to upper middle class student population. The girls in the separate groups were matched in age and were from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Both groups of participants had been given explanations regarding what I was studying via email and telephone conversations prior to agreeing to partake in the research. Consent forms containing written summarizations and the purpose of the research were mailed to all participants and their parents prior to the focus groups and were returned at the time the focus groups took place. While I did not mention disordered eating as a point of focus in the research, I did mention an interest in adolescent health behaviors, gender related concerns, and coeducational versus single sex school environments.

In effort to ease the discomfort of partaking in a 'formal' research study, the focus groups took place in my apartment, which happened to be nearby the homes of a number of the participants. Both interviews were held on weekend afternoons with identical refreshments served–including soda, brownies, trail mix, pretzels, and candy. Two research assistants were also present at the discussions, which were video recorded. After giving an overview of my interests in gender issues and health related behaviors, I explained that I was beginning my research in this broad area by inviting two groups of adolescent peers attending either a single sex or coeducational private institution in New York to my home to informally talk to me about

their lives at school. Both groups proceeded as typical unstructured interviews with conversation primarily led by the participants. Depending on the content of discussion, my research assistants and I periodically steered towards or away from certain topics and probed for more information in areas of special interest such as attitudes around body image, eating behaviors and gender related issues.

Focus groups were chosen as a methodology because of the exploratory nature of this early stage in the research. By talking with them in a semi-social setting, I hoped to gather a sense of what these two particular groups of girls, both in their sophomore year, experienced at their schools in regards to gender concerns and if this had any detectable impact on eating and body image issues. Initially, in order to prepare appropriately for the topics to be raised in the focus groups, brief unstructured 'pilot' interviews were held with individual adolescent girls from other schools who did not later participate in the group interviews. Additionally, in order to contextualize the data that were gathered at the focus groups, time was spent following one of the participants from each of the groups throughout a day at school.

Results

Focus group with peers from a coeducational environment:

The participants of the first group included four girls attending a prestigious independent coeducational school in Riverdale–an exclusive section of the Bronx. These girls described themselves as "best friends" and were excited and talkative upon entering my apartment. Immediately after sitting down they accepted the offer to help themselves with the snacks provided. Soda was poured and plates egregiously filled with trail mix. Initially, the feeling in the room was relaxed and comfortable. After describing the purpose of the group as being to better understand the gendered dynamics that take place in both coeducational and single sex school environments, I asked the girls to tell me about the school they attend. The important and interesting information to be drawn from this conversation was the obvious demonstration of a sense of loyalty to their school. They described the social climate as "like a typical high school" with "cliques and gossip about who is wearing what" in terms of clothing. Their school

environment is both "supportive and liberal," and for them, the positive relationships with their teachers were unique in that "you don't feel like they [the teachers] are so superior." In fact one participant, who had attended a public school in the past, saw this as a particular selling point when choosing this as her new school to attend. As conversation continued, the group eagerly ate the candy and brownies as well.

The tone of dialogue noticeably changed when I initiated the discussion of gender issues at their school. There was a clear hesitation to respond after asking if gender was ever addressed in their classes. Three individuals eventually said no, and the fourth reluctantly asked me to explain more specifically what I meant. Before I even had an opportunity to elaborate, she revealed that there is a class, Women's Literature, that they can opt to take next year. I then inquired about the presence of any support systems for gender issues, and the girls responded quickly with a satisfied "Yes, there is a club for girls." Apparently one for boys had also been recently proposed but it was turned down due to a lack of interest. None of the girls in the present group had ever been involved in the gender issues club and noted that while it was well-regarded, people tended to join the "more fun clubs like music." A brief lull in conversation prompted one of the girls (who later proved to be the participant to most often express a dissenting opinion), admitted that she thought "being a girl socially in [their] school was harder than being a guy." When asked why, she described how the gossip is always formulated around girls rather than boys, and it is the girls who always end up forming enemies. Seemingly in defense of their school, one of the other participants quickly chided that "girls in general are that way, no matter what kind of school you are in."

According to this group of 15 year old girls, the gendered situation at their school was ideal. They claimed that girls had an equal if not greater voice in the classroom environment. In their opinion, girls in fact had "more power" in classes specifically because whenever a girl forgot her homework she could talk her way out of a penalty simply by saying how sorry she was that she had left it at home. Apparently this was acceptable behavior from girls; whereas guys, they explained, would never even attempt to get out of it. Boys are expected to take the penalty

"like a man", that is without complaint. What I deemed most significant about this conversation was that this practice was described as an example of girls holding *more power*. Exactly what felt powerful about having teachers essentially display lower expectations of girls in terms of academic performance was not made entirely clear to us in this discussion.

Another example of the questionable interpretation of behaviors exhibited by teachers was revealed during a conversation about school advisors. Every student in the school was assigned an advisor to whom they could turn when they had any kind of problem whether it be academic, social, or of a more personal nature. When we inquired about whether or not advisors encouraged students toward taking specific courses or following certain career paths, they asserted with great pleasure that yes they definitely did. Again, it was their peculiar example of encouragement that proved most revealing. One participant described how she had wanted to take Intensive Physics next year. She explained that her advisor was *kind* enough to warn her how difficult the math was in that particular course and suggested she register for a less rigorous course that would still cover the same general themes covered in Intensive Physics. Another participant also confirmed that it is common to be encouraged to take the "more simple approach" to their academic schedules. She too interpreted this as a positive aspect of their relationships with their advisors and teachers. There was no mention of whether or not this is also the case for boys.

The word feminism was met with extreme displeasure in this group. Eyes rolled back and comments were made about feminists being "men-haters" and "women who simply want to be better than men." When asked specifically if they believed that women had achieved full equality with men, three of them immediately said yes with marked certainty. The fourth (the dissenter mentioned above) hesitated for a moment before asking how they could be so sure since they were not in fact experiencing the real world yet. This comment provoked the others to start laughing at her while yelling "What!? Are you a grandma all of the sudden!" In an attempt to remain relatively neutral, while easing the discomfort being experienced by the girl who was courageous enough to speak her mind, I added that she had a very good point and it was

something the others might want to think about more.

Throughout our discussion, it was made quite clear that having boys present at their school was a very important part of maturing for these four young women. One of the participants even noted that her philosophy, inherited from her mother, "is that a big part of why we are at school is to learn how to socialize." Genuine socializing to this group involves interacting with the opposite sex. According to them, single sex environments are simply "not natural." This conversation in particular made it quite evident that academics were not the main concern in the lives of these girls; although, it is unclear whether or not there was a wish to project a socially desirable image to us in this specific context. With audacity, the group dissenter did however stand on her own ground by saying that she thought it would be unwise to pay $20,000 in tuition per year solely to learn how to behave around boys. This comment of course ignited a debate on the appropriate balance between academics and a social life. No clear verdict was actually reached; however, one salient theme did emerge from this discussion: youth is a cherished virtue. Despite the trials and tribulations of adolescence, this group of teenaged girls whole-heartedly loved being young and free from responsibilities. While their relationships with their parents were admittedly strained, they would not trade "the annoying rules" and regulations imposed by their parents merely for the independence of adulthood.

Much of the remaining discussion revolved around the active social lives of these four young women. They described in animated detail a "war" between them and another larger group of girls at school over the highly desired attention of the boys. Whenever the opportunity arose there was an attempt to steer the conversation towards issues of appearance, exercise, body image and eating behaviors; however, these topics proved difficult to discuss. Brief responses to questions about appearance almost invariably led back to the topic of clothing. Fashion was apparently "huge" at their school. They did at one point say that they were indeed "very concerned" about appearance and of course they would love to be perfect and beautiful, but if they were not, "it is not the end of the world or anything." This point was communicated in an interesting analogy to guys and sports. One participant noted that it (appearance for girls) is just

like with guys and sports, *of course* they (guys, that is) want to be really athletic, but again "it is not the end of the world if they aren't."

When we questioned them specifically about guys' expectations for girls' appearances the girls became peculiarly reticent. One muttered quietly that the guys do in fact want girls to have good bodies. She noted that she has witnessed girls being called names if they were "even just a little overweight." In an attempt to find out what they considered "a little overweight," I asked what they thought boys consider 'favorably slender.' While no specific weight or size was mentioned, the girls said explicitly, yet still with obvious reluctance, that expectations were "high."

Following this conversation the air was tense making the topic of eating an unpopular one. This group did not have much to say about their eating habits except that they usually socialized in the park instead of going to lunch, breakfast was a rarity, and dinner (typically eaten with their families) was their only regular meal. While I was initially concerned about the report of these patterns, time spent with them at school revealed the continual snacking that tended to replace real meals. Given their immediate indulgence into the food provided at the focus group, I cautiously presumed that I was dealing with a group of "normal" teenaged eaters. The tension felt was most likely attributable to the typical discomfort people experience after eating a lot of sugary foods. During a lull in the conversation, two of the girls laid down on their backs and complained of their fullness; one said that she had "never eaten so much in [her] life." Nevertheless, none of their eating behaviors nor their responses to questions about eating appeared completely out of the ordinary.

Focus group with peers from a single sex environment:

While the first group consisted of four best friends, the second was comprised of three peers with less intimately involved relationships who all attended a prestigious single sex institution located on the upper east side of Manhattan. From the start, this discussion took on an entirely different feeling than the first group had. Notably, the original number of girls who had agreed to attend this group was seven, and given that only three arrived, the first topic of

discussion was why the others had failed to come. Apologizing profusely for the unreliability of their absent peers, the girls described how everyone was extremely busy working on an upcoming term paper for their history course. Before we could even sit down and officially begin the interview, complaints about being tired and overworked set the tone for the rest of our pending discussion.

Here again I asked the group to first tell me a little about their school. Unlike group one, these young women did not appear as content with their lives at school and displayed no clear sense of loyalty towards their school specifically, or single sex education for that matter. The eating behaviors of group two were much more discreet than the girls from the coeducational environment. While the exact same refreshments were served, these girls were very slow to accept any of them. It seemed that only after my two research assistants and I had set the example of taking generous amounts of food, did the girls begin to eat small controlled portions themselves. They poured no drinks for themselves until well into the group interview and were presumably quite thirsty from continual talking.

The most significant content of this group's discussion was indeed around what they referred to as "the hidden curriculum" at their school. There were a lot of intense feelings over the "social education" indoctrinated into the minds of the girls since kindergarten. It was explained that their particular school placed a very strong emphasis on manners, such as treating your neighbor appropriately, putting others before yourself, displaying utmost respect for your elders, always maintaining decorum in public, not speaking out of turn, etc. They described that as children the school held mock birthday parties and afternoon teas so the administration could ensure that the girls were in fact learning to behave like "young ladies." Once they got to the middle school (grades 7-9) however, this "social education" significantly "eased up" and emphasis was increasingly placed on academics. We were told that now that they had reached the upper school, there were only traces of the finishing school features remaining in their curriculum. The girls explained that ironically there were now clubs such as the "Gender Roles" club and the "Gay/Straight Alliance", and that feminism had increasingly become a buzz word.

While these older students watched their younger peers marching around the halls in their conservative uniforms like "little prisoners in some anti-feminist regime," the school's concern for them as young adults, shifted almost exclusively to their academic performance and preparing them to become competitive players in a male dominated world. The girls revealed a great deal of resentment over these conflicting messages. We questioned whether or not their obvious consciousness of it seemed to help matters. Unfortunately, they claimed, "the damage had already been done." Despite considerable probing, the girls failed to articulate, specifically, to what kind of "damage" they were referring.

Discussions about future careers were a much more significant issue to the single sex group. Rigorous preparation for the SAT exam necessitating great investment of time and money was described as "a given" in order to even remain in the running for admission into the nation's top universities. Summers were typically spent attending academically enriching programs abroad which were considered simply another favorable line on an admissions application to an elite institution of higher education. Interestingly, the girls themselves were not enthusiastic about their plans for the summer. In fact they described their ideal summer vacation as entailing no large commitments. Their most preferred activity was described as "simply hanging out with their friends and essentially doing nothing."

Aside from the presence of a hidden curriculum and the subsequent contradicting academic pressure placed on girls attending single sex schools, much of the remaining discussion involved sexual behavior. During individual interviews held prior to both group discussions, I had been told that girls in the single sex schools tended to be more sexually active. (Although, after hearing about group one's lives being so preoccupied with boys, I wondered about the accuracy of this information!) The group in the coeducational environment had described sexual activity as "becoming more common this year." They had divulged "hooking up" on most weekends with different boys (hooking up is the term they use for kissing and sexual foreplay). Apparently, for the coeducational group, "hook ups" were preferred because they were non-committal acts. In one participant's words "That's what's kind of nice about a hook-up, like it's

not like you're waiting for them to ask you out the next day, because you are just friends and it just wound up happening." They were explicit however, in assuring us that sexual intercourse was typically reserved for those in monogamous relationships. The girls from the single sex environment on the other hand, had a different take on sexual activity. Boys were rarely considered "just friends." They were willing to admit that there was almost always a romantic implication when they flirted with or expressed interest in a boy. Much of their conversation however, concerned their hyper-sexual younger peers and siblings. Interestingly, they said very little of their own sexual activities. Perhaps this was due to the less intimate relationships between the participants of group two in comparison to those in group one. Nevertheless, reluctance to self disclose once again indicated reservation, a behavior the school has evidently taught successfully to these three young women.

It was clear by the end of the evening that the girls from the single sex school used the discussion in a very different fashion than the girls from the coeducational school. Because it was the first day on daylight savings time, the group had long exceeded the original two hour allotment without recognition on my part. I was quite surprised when I glanced at my watch after almost four hours had already passed! I knew that we had to soon wrap things up, but it was difficult given that the discussion was clearly therapeutic for them. A sense of sadness was felt at the end of group two. A lot of difficult issues were discussed, and the girls remarked how nice it was to have been able to talk to someone "cool" who was willing to sincerely listen to the truly stressful lives they are actually leading. I sensed that group two was able to gain something positive from the experience. Group one on the other hand had not responded as seriously. For them it was another carefree Saturday afternoon that will likely soon be forgotten. Despite their willingness to discuss their personal lives and involvement with boys, I definitely sensed less trust between myself and group one. They displayed clear defensiveness about their school and they seemed to take care not to say anything that might incriminate coeducation.

Overall, the most revealing source of information from these focus groups proved to be an acute awareness of the unspoken mood in the groups. Group one's nonchalant attitude about

academics and a conscious desire to enjoy and preserve their age of youth was a stark contrast to the reflective nature of group two, and the therapeutic atmosphere they created probably due to the extreme pressure under which they felt they were living. While group one conveyed pure enjoyment of the present, the young women attending the single sex school had a clear focus on what was happening tomorrow. High expectations coming from both the home and school environments helped create these perhaps even dysfunctionally motivated young women who are relentlessly striving to achieve.

Participant observation in schools:

My visits to both schools illustrated the experiences described in the context of the group interviews, sometimes accurately, sometimes not. Classroom dynamics in the coeducational environment *were* in fact clearly gendered. Girls did *not* have more 'power' in my eyes; rather they spoke up less in class, and were called on less frequently by many, although not all, of the faculty. While academic expectations were high in both the single sex and coeducational environments, the girls with whom I spent most of my time in the coed school still appeared to be handling the pressures more effectively than their single sex counterparts. Perhaps the presence of boys provides a healthy distraction for them. Given limited data available at this early stage of research, we can only speculate on what might be behind the disparate tendencies.

It also should be noted that there was evidence of disordered eating present in both environments. All of the girls discussed the taboo of eating in front of boys for fear of appearing "out of control" or "piggish." The most popular lunch entre' in both environments was a salad of fruit and vegetables. The food available for the girls in the single sex environment however, was especially limiting and almost entirely low in calories and fat. There were few sweets provided and the ice cream bin was completely empty. After inquiring, I was told that it was never filled.

A student from the single sex environment described eating as a way to uphold an image. When I pointed out a few individuals with hearty hot meals on their trays, I was told that they were "nerds." In this particular school the more popular girls ate only salads for lunch. Once again,

this kind of information was more difficult to retrieve from the coeducational group. Even while I was visiting their school they remained reluctant to discuss food and typical eating habits. Our time together in the lunchroom was brief and obviously rushed. I believe my presence elicited marked discomfort in this particular context. This group seemed to make an almost conscious effort to avoid the topic of eating behaviors with me. The next section will discuss possible reasons for this finding as well as provide an overall analysis of the data presented in the current paper.

Discussion

The most salient, albeit unspoken, theme that recurred throughout this research was the issue of competition. While competitiveness has traditionally been considered a characteristic that is antithetical to a feminine disposition, the young women participating in the present research all displayed a fiercely competitive nature in some aspect of their lives. The girls in the single sex environment are clearly pushed to excel in the realm of academic achievement as was suggested in the literature reviewed. The response to the pressure in this group of young women was either overzealous achievement and/or extreme guilt for not displaying the kind of excellence that is expected of them from their teachers and parents. In an individual interview conducted prior to the focus groups, a girl attending another similar single sex school in New York City revealed remarkable angst over the "extremely poor score of an 1140" that she received on her SAT. She acknowledged having been quite ill that day but nevertheless felt like a complete failure upon receipt of such a horrible score. Believing that she would have to raise her score by at least 200-300 points to even be able to apply to the kinds of schools she and her peers were considering attending, left her with a chronic feeling of anxiety. A general sense and fear of not being good enough lingered in the words of the girls educated in single sex environments.

Although they are only in the 10th grade, the girls from the single sex school already had undergraduate and graduate schools chosen for themselves. Their plans for the future were markedly more ambitious than their coeducational peers. While college was considered the next

step in their education among the coed group, there was much less of a sense of urgency in knowing which colleges they would attend and what specific field of study they would pursue once they got there. Recall that this group also expressed a lackadaisical attitude towards academics. They noted that they usually completed their assignments for school, but claimed to "let go and not stress over things" beyond that. There was no discussion of SAT preparation, acceptance into the top universities, graduate school or prestigious occupations. In fact when I brought up the topic of their futures and possible careers they displayed very little direction– almost as if it was something they rarely thought about. Whereas the single sex group noted, with confidence, wanting careers in medicine, acting, directing, and producing films, the coed group mentioned possibly majoring in psychology, theatrical make-up, and fashion. Later in our conversation, one of the coeducational participants who mentioned possibly wanting to major in psychology, asked me if that meant she had to go on to graduate school. It was clear that the thought of graduate school was not an attractive one and could possibly deter her from even pursuing the field. Clearly, for the coed group, an advanced degree was not considered "a given" as it had been communicated in the single sex group.

Despite the single sex girls' preoccupation with discussing the sexual activity of their peers, the lives of the girls in the coeducational group revolved to a much greater extent around boys. The competitiveness in the lives of these girls was apparent in their relationships with boys and their discussion of the opposing clique of girls at their school. The energy in the room was most evident when they discussed the "war" that had begun the year prior over a particular boy and now had grown to be over "the guys" in general. Each clique, consisting of all girls, was given a name almost as if they were members of some upper class private school gangs. They said with distinct pride that the opposition was known school-wide by teachers and students. In fact they compared it to the war between the Jets and the Sharks in the West Side Story.

The sexual activity discussed in the single sex group, on the other hand, appears to represent another way these girls are acting out their frustrations with the immense pressures

placed on them by their parents and school. The mere length of the group and the use of it as a therapeutic and rather cathartic experience may be an indicator of these girls needing more psychological support than they are currently getting. While in group one I struggled at times to keep conversation going and continually experienced their resistance to talking about certain subject matters, in group two I could hardly get in a word edgewise. The amount of un-elicited information they offered was overwhelming and very difficult to process.

The levels of trust displayed by each group also deserve analytical attention. Perhaps due to my mentioned interest in feminism I suspect that the coeducational group presumed that I saw single sex environments as superior for young women. With all of my questions around eating behaviors it is also quite plausible that they speculated that I was seeking information to support a hypothesis that girls in coeducational environments are at greater risk for disordered eating. This could perhaps explain the reticence on the food and body image subject matters in the coeducational group. It may have also inflated their portrayal of contentment with their lives both in and outside of school. The very fact that a defense of their school was evidenced however is significant in and of itself. Regardless of any preconceived notions about the purpose of the research, recall that the single sex group showed very little allegiance to single sex education or their specific school. Nor did they appear to perceive my emphasis on eating behaviors. Perhaps this was because the single sex group offered me information about it without such probing on my part. This fact reveals that their demonstrated level of trust towards me was quite noticeably stronger than the trust presented by the coeducational group.

The data collected for this paper in many ways follow the patterns initially revealed in the prior literature reviewed. Academic achievement was indeed more evident in the single sex group, as was the promotion of conflicting gender role prescriptions. The coeducational group was clearly exposed to more subtle sex role stereotyping from teachers and peers, and their career ambitions reflected more traditionally female occupations. Also congruent with the literature is the fact that the women's movement and feminism was a topic met with extreme disapproval by the coed group, while the single sex group expressed no strong opinions either for

or against them. In addition, the competing interests often represented in consumers of single sex education (i.e., Lee & Mark's traditional versus opportunity structures discussed previously) were certainly evident in the three girls present at the focus group. Information about their parents' occupations and the day-to-day lifestyles of their families indicated that one participant was a product of a household from the traditional structure, while another a sure product of the opportunity structure. The third participant probably fell somewhere in between the two and, interestingly, appeared to be the least troubled in the group.

Given the methodology and short-term nature of this research, we cannot say for sure which population displayed greater disordered eating. Regardless, such limited exposure to the participants of this study made it impossible and unwise to diagnose true eating disorders, but, neither of these goals encompassed the purpose of the research. Although I do feel it is necessary to again note that symptoms were indeed evident among girls studying in both school environments. Nevertheless, gendered dynamics representing the processes by which the outcomes of the previous research reviewed have most likely been reached, were successfully revealed within the context of this study. Overall, I do believe it is safe to accept that while coeducational environments may tend to produce young women who are less academically focused and exposed to more potentially damaging sex role stereotyping, the intense pressure of single sex environments in conjunction with particularly confusing gender role messages may be just as threatening to a vulnerable adolescent.

Conclusion

Most adolescents are exposed to Western Culture's obsession with thinness today. It must be recognized that there is no environment in which girls are educated that is entirely immune from appearance preoccupations. In addition, women cannot completely avoid encountering some form of conflicting gender role prescriptions living in Western society. In the words of Candace Heyward, "we are in an age of tremendous gender-role upheaval and there are no guide books to point the way" (p.190). It is my hope that mere cognizance of the contradictions in the over arching gender regimes of our culture, and particularly in single sex

institutions, will gradually attenuate the potency of these problematic messages. To expedite matters, perhaps efforts should be made for implementing "unconventional" prevention strategies for eating disorders in our high schools. Today, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the awareness is indeed out there. Girls know what eating disorders are, and they know that engaging in these kinds of behaviors can be life threatening. The forces needing to be addressed are operating on a subconscious level. Undermining their powers will be no easy task. Perhaps the curriculum could incorporate required classes involving gender issues that address the contradictions with which adolescents are faced. Without even overtly connecting it to eating disorders, a forum where feelings about these conflicting messages can be discussed may help alleviate the confusion, fear, and ambivalence around gender role expectations. In light of the present study, special concentration should be made on these issues in single sex institutions. Future research should be directed at specifically testing this theory of conflicting gender role prescriptions in a way that will allow us to better understand the complicated nature of the socio-cultural contribution to eating disorders.

Endnote

1) **Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972**
(Title 20 United States Constitution Section 1618-1688)

Section 1681. Sex
(a) Prohibition against discrimination; exceptions. No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...

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